

# Be FireWise - prepare now for next fire season

by Doug Newbould

The snow is beginning to accumulate, the mercury has been hovering between zero and the freezing mark, and the sun is heading south - as are many of our friends and neighbors. Sounds like a good time to hunker down next to the ol' woodstove with a good book, and catch up on some of the sleep we lost in July. "Well, hold on there just a minute, pal. There's still something you need to do before you start hibernating," says a nagging little voice in the back of my head. "You still need to cut those dead spruce out back and cut more of that brush there next to the shed and burn those slash piles you made last spring!" "Aw man! I already had my boots off," I say, whining to myself. "But you know I'm right," says the little voice, a tad too cheerfully.

Perhaps you've had a similar conversation with yourself recently, or maybe it's one of those honey-do's down near the bottom of your list. Whatever the case, NOW is the best time to throw on the Carharts and make your property fire-ready, BEFORE the next fire season sneaks up on us. Perhaps you have already done everything that can be done to make your home and property safe from the threat of wildfire. Are you absolutely sure you haven't missed anything? Or perhaps, you don't really know how to get started. In either case, there is a program you need to know about - it's called FireWise.

The FireWise Community Action Program is a program developed nationally by fire management professionals, to improve the chances your family and home will survive a wildfire. The Alaska Wildland Fire Coordinating Group (AWFCG) has adapted the FireWise program for use in Alaska. The FireWise program is available to Kenai Peninsula residents through Project Impact, the Borough's disaster preparedness project. FireWise materials have been assembled in folders for distribution to area residents, free of charge.

Each folder contains a fire risk assessment form and six pamphlets, which describe the steps you can take to prepare your home and property for a wildfire.

The majority of the FireWise action steps are easy to do, inexpensive and self-paced. The six elements of the program are Landscaping, Access & Signs, Emergency Water Supply, FireWise Construction, Home Planning, and When Wildfire Threatens.

You can get your FireWise kit at several locations on the Kenai Peninsula: your local fire department, the state Division of Forestry office in Soldotna, or here at Refuge Headquarters on Ski Hill Road. Once you have your folder in hand, you can begin to develop a FireWise Action Plan for your home and property.

If you are really motivated, you can bring your neighbors into the process and develop an action plan for your neighborhood, subdivision or community. There are special "train the trainer" materials available to assist individuals or community groups who want to develop neighborhood action plans. If you or your group wants FireWise training, or you have questions about the program, you can contact me at 260-5994, call the Division of Forestry at 262-4124, or call your local fire department.

The important thing to remember about the FireWise Community Action Program is the word "Action." All the planning you might do won't count for much if you fail to implement your plan. As one of my favorite fire chiefs is so fond of saying, "Every FireWise home is one less home we'll have to worry about when the Big One happens!" And I agree. At the very least, a FireWise home will be a home we can try to defend from a destructive wildfire. A home without defensible space, might be a home we cannot safely defend. So get up, put your boots back on and head down to the firehouse for your FireWise kit. That book you've been planning to read will still be waiting for you when the snow gets too deep to work.

*Doug Newbould is the Assistant Fire Management Officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. You can get more information about the Refuge or view previous Refuge Notebook columns on our website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*